# Engaging the student voice in our 'new normal'

## How are universities planning to capture, and act upon, feedback from students in 2020-21?

# Contents

# Introduction

The unprecedented challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have led to major disruption for the higher education sector worldwide.

The initial shift to online teaching from March 2020 raised serious questions around how the student voice can be captured effectively (through module evaluation surveys and other student feedback mechanisms), especially given the sector's reliance on traditional approaches.

With the majority of universities subsequently advocating blended approaches to teaching and learning for the 2020-21 academic year, they have spent the summer reflecting on their responses to Covid-19 and developing plans for engaging students.

However, with coronavirus outbreaks hitting campuses in autumn 2020 and some universities being forced to temporarily pull face-to-face teaching, it is clear that the sector is in for a bumpy ride. For many, this brings obvious challenges in terms of student satisfaction and engagement.

Whatever the mode of delivery, institutions know they need to ensure that teaching is delivering value and provide evidence that students themselves are receiving a fulfilling education, making insight available to university leaders as quickly as possible if this is proving not to be the case.

As well as the quality assurance rationale, simply ensuring that current students are generally happy with their institution's response during this difficult period, and specifically that their concerns around modules/courses are listened to, is going to be key. Not just in terms of student retention but also minimising the threat of those students potentially posting negative reviews or comments on influential online forums which could hamper future student recruitment activity.

How feedback from students about their teaching and learning experience (and wider student experience) is captured – and quickly, given the fast-paced environment – during this academic year is going to be critical to institutional performance and longer term strategy. There is also some learning here around understanding what systems and processes for acting upon feedback need to be put in place for the next significant event.

In this new eBook, we hear from senior university leaders based in the UK, USA, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, South Africa, Luxembourg and Switzerland about their approaches to engaging the student voice in our 'new normal'.

**John Atherton,**
*General Manager
(Europe and Africa), Explorance
jatherton@explorance.com
www.explorance.com*

# American University of Beirut

The pandemic and ensuing crisis came as a surprise to the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the same way as other institutions. We had just started spring term teaching in the traditional approach when lockdown was imposed, and we had to move to online teaching and instruction.

Very few of us instructors had prior knowledge and expertise to teach online or adequate familiarity with online resources and available tools. Students were faced with the same situation, in addition to the fact that many lacked electricity, internet at home or tablets/laptops to follow up on lectures and assignments.

It was a difficult move but the Information Technology Unit at AUB and various faculties took the lead in launching our 'Teaching During Times of Crisis' and 'Continue Teaching in Times of Crisis' initiatives to provide immediate online training to faculty, staff and students in order to manage the online teaching as smoothly as possible.

The 'Continue Teaching in Times of Crisis' page provided relevant information and resources for faculties/schools, including dedicated teams that were assigned to support faculty members in their efforts. As faculty members modified their syllabi, course schedules and requirements, they faced challenges in setting new deadlines for quizzes, assignments and projects.

To help manage the situation, the Office of Information Technology created an AUB Student Workload Dashboard that provided faculty members with important information on their students' "workload" in each of their classes. Detailed instructions and training were given on various available tools, their use, and how to maximise use of learning management systems like Moodle and Blackboard. Whatever the teaching mode was (writing on the board, PowerPoint, live demos, class discussions etc.), a dedicated team from IT was available to give the appropriate online solutions to help instructors deliver their material efficiently. These measures helped sustain teaching during spring term and ensure continuity.

As student input is of utmost importance, at the end of the spring term we issued a detailed online Student Learning Experience Questionnaire (SLEQ) that assessed online experience, challenges met, tools mostly used and extent of attainment of outcomes. Students' response rate was good at 83% (around 37,000 responses) and SLEQ provided valuable information that helped in future planning. SLEQ evaluated online teaching experience in terms of the following dimensions:

- Instructor preparedness, timely response to student queries, frequent class discussions, provided feedback and guidance.

- Online material: ease of access to it, quality, organisation, appropriateness to level, ease of navigation, addressing different learning styles.

- Learning activities, encouraged interaction with instructor and students, helped share ideas, made course interesting and engaging.

- Online support, information helpful, available when needed, enhanced learning experience.

- Online tools, variety used, range of online resources.

- Workload, manageable.

In addition, there were sections on online teaching tools, the extent of attainment of learning outcomes and a comments section within the survey.

Results were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively (comments) and reported for the institution, by faculty and department, and by class level to be able to identify areas of weaknesses and to improve on them. They were shared with all faculties concerned and with IT. The main challenges faced by students during online teaching were:

- Connectivity – internet connectivity, electricity cuts and technical difficulties.

- Assessment – limited time assigned for exams, the types and content of assessment being administered, frequency of testing, cheating and unclear grading criteria.

- Online content and the level of understanding it – difficulty understanding some concepts through video, took longer to learn from online sessions, and many

students had to resort to YouTube to gain a better understanding of concepts or had to rely on self-learning.

- Workload and pace of course – 'unmanageable', students overwhelmed with assignments and papers, 'pace not well adjusted to the current situation', clarity of deadlines, and overlap with other courses (scheduling).

- Communication – lagging communication due to students not receiving responses to their emails from professors, lack of (or limited) written feedback received on assignments and quizzes, type of feedback not appropriate for the course, difficulty in communicating with their classmates for doing group work, and so group work was not managed well.

- Platforms designated for online learning – unfamiliarity of students with them.

- Psychosocial wellbeing – issues were raised related to lockdown and exacerbated by the socioeconomic situation in the country. Some students expressed feeling stressed and anxious due to the workload required by their courses, which in some instances led to low concentration and a low motivation to work.

> *"Student voice is essential for assuring the attainment of one of AUB's institutional goals, 'to provide excellence in education'"*

A revised version of the SLEQ will be administered at end of the fall term to assess impact of changes and any new issues that have risen. Similarly, as the University went fully online in the fall, though it was planning to go hybrid – and all orientation, registration and advising activities were online – another survey was administered to evaluate all the processes students had to go through to enroll and the challenges they faced. Results will be shared with various stakeholders to ensure smooth running processes in spring 2021, in case the University
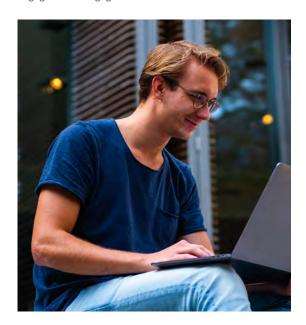
is still operating online. Student voice is essential for assuring the attainment of one of AUB's institutional goals, as expressed in its mission, "to provide excellence in education".



**Dr Karma El Hassan is Associate Professor of Educational Psychology Measurement and Evaluation and Director of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at the American University of Beirut**

# De Montfort University

Over the past couple of years we have worked hard to turn up the volume so we can hear our students better – and we have been steadily complementing the representative kind of system where students act as course representatives in the usual way, with one where we regard our students as the best experts on what it means to be a student.

We have been working with our students as consultants, advisors and advocates for various educational initiatives, asking them to inform us about what they really need – thus moving away from what can sometimes be an adversarial relationship to something that is much more about mutuality. We also started a project called Engage, an attempt to reach out to students who were a little less likely to step up at that first call, essentially trying to engage the disengaged.

Then Covid-19 hit and within a matter of days we had gone from a situation where we were working in partnership with our students to a situation where we were just telling them the next stage of things we had to do – and that we really had no choice about doing. However, we were lucky that our students exercised their 'voice' and told us the things we absolutely needed to know and the consultants, advisors and advocates that I refer to continued working on their projects, adapting very quickly to communicating digitally.

Our already strong relationship with the Students' Union developed even further. With academic executive officer Laura Flowers we worked hard to ensure that our University communications going out to students were reinforced by communications going out from the Students' Union, and vice-versa. Laura also joined our Strategic Planning Group for 2020-21, and led a workstream on the student voice. This mandated that we asked our students to advise and guide us on not only what went well and what they liked and did not like about learning and teaching in the lockdown period, but also what they expect and need in any non-traditional or online environment for the new academic year.

Laura pulled together a team drawn from a combination of Students' Union officers and student representatives of various constituencies. They ran online focus groups and developed a wide-ranging questionnaire that captured as far as possible what it really felt like to be a student in the sudden shift to remote learning, and what students need us to know. Her survey reached more than 500 respondents, roughly equally split across our four faculties, and revealed the levels of anxiety and stress experienced by our students when we all rushed to the online environment. This reinforces for me that, in 2020-21, we must use our technologies creatively and also compassionately both in teaching and in student support.

*"In all that we do, we must ensure that we are still listening to the student voice – the level of prioritisation given to this activity has certainly evolved"*

So while we have not been able to carry on to the same fashion with some of our student groups, we have been absolutely determined that the student voice is heard in the planning that we are having to undertake. In all that we do, we must ensure that we are still listening to the student voice and that we do not 'do things to them' or 'throw things at them' – that they are always part of the conversation, as indeed they are entitled to be. The level of prioritisation given to this activity has certainly evolved – and what we are clear on is that the student voice has a

vital role to play in ensuring the rapid-response move to online teaching is ultimately delivering educational value to students.

Like many universities, we regularly survey our students at module level and factor their responses into our annual reflections on enhancement. Lockdown hit just as we had started this process, so inevitably this had an impact on our ability to gather the student point of view of their teaching and learning during the last academic year. We are considering our approach to module level feedback in 2020-21, understanding that it is going to be such an unusual year. We want to make sure we develop our feedback mechanisms so that these reflect what the year is likely to look like – and that students are asked to feed back on their actual experiences as opposed to some theoretical experience they might have had, if we were not in the situation we are now in.

Across the sector, we have done amazing things during the emergency lockdown period, but we will need to do even better this academic year. At De Montfort University our double aim is to protect the health and wellbeing of our University community while also delivering the best educational experience possible, despite Covid-19 restrictions.

**Professor Jackie Labbe is Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at De Montfort University**

# Les Roches

In spring 2020, all our students – like so many others worldwide – found themselves learning remotely. Unlike online programmes, in which students enrol with an awareness of what their learning will entail, our students had not chosen a remote learning path.

Expecting that some might struggle, we put in place several feedback channels for students, including an email address dedicated to questions about remote learning and manned by programme managers, virtual workshops for students to help them adjust to remote learning and regular drop-in meetings. We used feedback from all of these channels to constantly adjust material, resources, activities and assessments.

When we paused our remote delivery of courses at the end of May for a summer break, we sent out a survey to all students to capture their overall remote learning experience and used this data to inform our decisions. We hoped as many of our students as possible would be able to return to campus at the end of July to complete their courses and final assessments. However, we suspected that for some this would not be possible.



We needed to make important decisions about how to best serve the needs of students, some of whom would return, albeit to socially distanced face-to-face classes while others would continue their studies remotely. The playing field was no longer level and the new challenge entailed building a strategy for success going forward.

These were some of the key takeaways from the remote learning survey:

- Students loved the messy but authentic recordings of live sessions. Several cohorts preferred them to the more polished pre-recorded videos produced by faculty.

- Enhanced pages on Moodle, an online learning platform used at Les Roches, were recognised by cohorts at all levels of learning as being the most useful resource during remote learning.

- First-year undergraduates prefer shorter live virtual classes of between 30 and 60 minutes with the preferred duration becoming longer for more mature students.

- While some students were proud of having become independent, confident, self-disciplined learners and showed extraordinary resilience and awareness in their reflections, others struggled with feelings of isolation and experienced remote learning as a real challenge.

These findings were integrated into our guiding principles as we became one of the first institutions in Switzerland to deliver in HyFlex. This simultaneous face-to-face and remote synchronous mode of teaching and learning also caters for asynchronous learners by making recordings of classes and other adapted activities available online.

Our remote students live in several time zones and connectivity can pose problems for live streaming. Giving them the choice to follow live virtual classes or watch recordings at their convenience was very much appreciated in the spring. HyFlex, while very challenging for faculty, provides the flexibility that we needed to continue to offer remote students the choice to follow classes synchronously or asynchronously. In addition, we were aware that some of our face-to-face students might be required to self-isolate or quarantine during the semester and HyFlex ensured that their studies would not be interrupted.

The challenges of HyFlex delivery are several and success will depend on how well faculty are equipped to face these challenges. Providing an equivalent learning experience to three different groups of learners can be managed by identifying the specific needs of each group and tailoring activities and resources to meet these needs. Ensuring equality of attention can be achieved by carefully managing opportunities for interaction, including virtual office hours and rigorously encouraging and acknowledging the contributions.

At Les Roches, we can see curious, agile faculty who are already converted by the dynamic energy of HyFlex delivery and students are rising to the challenge, actively supporting each other and their faculty. This is a key success factor of our approach.

---

*"Taking timely action based on student feedback combined with measuring the success of action over the semester is the approach we will continue to use"*

---

Our end-of-course evaluations include a combination of standard institution-wide questions and custom questions added by faculty for their courses. It is impossible to meaningfully compare the data collected at the end of the first semester of 2020 with previous semesters, but it is encouraging to note that, despite all the disruptions of the past semester, the mean of means across the institution fell by only 0.2 (on a five-point Likert scale) from the previous semester.

Taking timely action based on student feedback combined with measuring the success of action over the semester is the approach we will continue to use as we move towards 2021.



**Ruth Puhr is Head of Teaching and Learning Development at Les Roches**

# London Metropolitan University

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly had a major impact on the way in which we think about the delivery of our higher education curricula, putting the student experience front and centre, both in terms of the need to understand the online delivery environment and how we might improve the students' experience of it. My own institution, along with the rest of the country and much of the world, went into lockdown in March 2020 and whilst we had already been considering, in preparation for what seemed likely to come, the possibilities of remote delivery and online learning, the reality of lockdown dawned very quickly.

The University was forced to deliver all of its teaching online, in a very short space of time. This put an enormous amount of pressure on staff in terms of changing their teaching practice, as well as an enormous amount of pressure on our administrative systems: not forgetting of course, the pressure on students to switch from their 'norms' for learning and their face-to-face interactions with their lecturers, to a remote and in some cases very lonely and restrictive environment. Whilst module and course evaluation allowed for some understanding of the student perspective, student rep forums proved to be the most useful approach in garnering student views on the experience of lockdown.  These were held more frequently than usual and will continue to be held at monthly intervals in the current academic year.

Linking student feedback and student engagement in the online environment, my colleagues and I can see that Covid has presented us with new ways of considering pedagogic approaches that are more engaging for students than the previous overreliance on the didactic method – an approach of 'I talk and you listen' has been driven to change, because of feedback from students, to one where academics feel more confident that we can work through this together.

This recent period has heightened an awareness of the ubiquity of information and our reliance on all things electronic and the gap with that context and the context of knowledge acquisition. Higher education sits concretely in the context of knowledge acquisition but the Covid crisis has brought into sharp focus the need for the 'human' element of the higher education experience. It has also demonstrated that technology and equipment shortages, which had not been previously been given much attention, were challenges that needed to be considered more fully.

It became evident that there was an overreliance by students on their smart phones, which frequently did not allow them to fully engage with their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). We had many instances of panicking students who needed to submit assessments but could not do so because they could not write their assessments and upload material on their phones to their VLE. The University had not anticipated this to the extent that it occurred and we realised very quickly that the presumption that everyone has access to technology that works is not necessarily true for all, and even when students and colleagues had access to a laptop or computer, Wi-Fi was often not reliable or failed due to poor signals and inadequate broadband and then smartphones became an important support mechanism for the learning experience.

*"The importance of students' feedback, as universities move into the new academic year, has come sharply into focus as a consequence of the Covid crisis"*

We learnt to be more flexible and more responsive and learnt more about the need for interactive student support. This, of course, was exhausting for all as colleagues found themselves spending more and more time online and 'online exhaustion' has been an ongoing feature of the remote environment, for all sorts of reasons. The feedback we received from students has taught us that the forced imposition of online teaching as a result of Covid not only underlines that online cannot simply replace classroom teaching, but that the interactive and experiential should be key dimensions of our pedagogic approaches.

The conversations we had with students reinforced the view that the scaffolding of the students' learning can be enhanced through a dialogue with the students. This

dialogue, framed as student feedback, built the students' resilience and their engagement with the new teaching environment, as well as allowing for a recognition of the importance of feedback in terms of the students' role as co-creators and owners of their learning.

The importance of students' feedback, as universities move into the new academic year, has come sharply into focus as a consequence of the Covid crisis as institutions seek to understand more about how to engage the whole student body in the online or remote environment. Certainly, in my own institution we have sought out the students' view both at the beginning of the Covid crisis and towards the end, in order to understand how the University should seek to both welcome new students and encourage existing students to return for the new academic year.

**Professor Jan Bamford is Head of Student Experience and Academic Outcomes and Co-Director for the Higher Education Research Group at London Metropolitan University**

# University of Luxembourg

The Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg entered lockdown on 16th March 2020. Prior to this the University had devoted nearly a month to developing strategies, as well as technological support, for ensuring partial and complete lockdown of both campuses and student residences.

When the first lockdown measures were announced on the morning of Friday 13th March, we were able to launch the partial closure of the Luxembourg Learning Centre (our library) that afternoon. Our teaching went online on the Monday, and most programmes were delivered remotely within days. Examinations were also held remotely and, for 2020-21, we have planned for a return to teaching in hybrid mode, keeping smaller groups face-to-face wherever possible.

The pandemic has led us to rethink some of the most basic student experiences. The most important challenge in this dramatic shift from a normal teaching environment into the 'new normal' is communication with students: How can we retain contact when we are cut off from the classroom and the office?

Our centralised student support services pride themselves on their busy waiting room and a drop-in service for psychological support. Suddenly, online appointments replaced both of these. Moreover, there were few established means of communicating with our students at central rather than programme level.

Whereas major decisions continued to be made with minimal consultation, because we were in a state of emergency we had to find ways of responding to and anticipating questions from our students. It is important to note here that our university is multilingual, with three teaching languages (English, French and German). 56% of our students are international and, of these, many use English as a lingua franca.

We decided to limit our pandemic-focused communications to English. First, a webpage for supporting remote teaching was set up within days and populated with FAQs that emerged from the key questions and answers of staff and students.

Second, an IT survey of all students who were enrolled for examinations established the nature and quality of their connectivity. This enabled us to improve internet connections in some student residences as well as to identify and support a small number of students who had no access to a laptop, for example through loans of equipment and through priority access to computers once the Luxembourg Learning Centre reopened.

More broadly, our discussions with students as well as among staff enabled the University to develop a better understanding of the importance of clear information in all examinations, regardless of medium.

Finally, the rapid development of an online platform for counselling during the pandemic also improved the provision of information and support for student inclusion and finances. Our student satisfaction survey had brought to our attention that we needed to raise awareness of our wellbeing and inclusion services.

> *"The pandemic impelled us to further clarify our vision of how we can develop the student voice – it has sped up changes that were already happening"*

All of the above form part of an ongoing, broader change. Evaluation by students of their own experience has been at programme level up to now. The University of Luxembourg founded its Student Delegation in 2018, and the first student satisfaction survey was run in autumn 2019. The results of that survey showed that the student voice is emerging in our institution. In this respect, the pandemic impelled us to further clarify our vision of how we can develop it. During the lockdown period, one faculty ran a survey of student experience, while another obtained programme-level feedback.

The pandemic sped up changes that were already happening, but my chief aim was to ensure that these adjustments might prove long-lasting. Short-term interventions, born of necessity, can lead to longer-term improvements in inclusion, student support and communication.

Our preparation for 2020-21 reflected the experiences of lockdown. Some programmes are bringing in continuous assessment and blended learning in response to positive student feedback. We are consulting the Student Delegation about social distancing and hybrid teaching next semester. The next student satisfaction survey will focus on the ways in which we offered support during the pandemic. These improved communications are some of the most important and very positive outcomes of this otherwise difficult period.
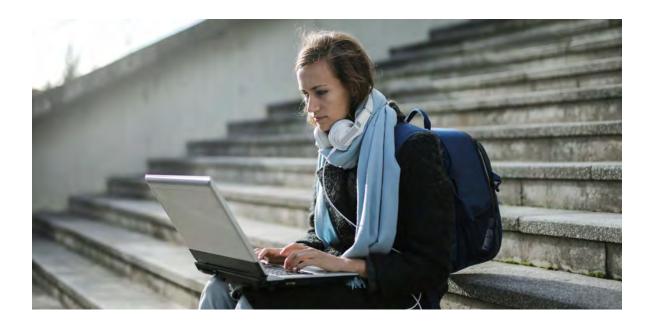
Above all, developing a dialogue with students continues to be a critical priority for the University, and my hope is that we will develop a 'student partnership' model in the near future.

**Professor Catherine Léglu is Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs at the University of Luxembourg**

photo courtesy of
Sophie Margue

# University of Minnesota

The biggest challenge that the University of Minnesota had in response to Covid-19 and course evaluation was whether or not to administer the student ratings of teaching when the University, like so many institutions, decided to pivot mid-semester.

There was quite a bit of internal discussion around that within the Provost office, with faculty governance and among college deans, and there were strong voices suggesting this was not the time – during a very stressful time overall – to administer these surveys, which by their nature can be anxiety producing for faculty and instructional staff.

Some were inclined to drop the student ratings of teaching for the spring semester because there was a sense that it would appear tone-deaf to instructors who were trying their best to teach effectively under difficult circumstances. And the fear that student ratings would be substantially lower in the aggregate across the institution had the potential of lowering trust among faculty who already felt stretched by trying to handle the transition.

What we learned in the process is that consultation across the campus was crucial and what was also important is that we were flexible in terms of changing the survey form.

What we ended up with was a heavily revised form that included a few core survey items that we believed to be the most consequential ones and a couple of additional items, including an open-ended item that addressed more thoroughly the pivot to online learning.

What I think helped persuade stakeholders around administering the student ratings of teaching was that we were now able to show what the student experience was between the beginning and end of the spring term and, as it turned out, those results were overwhelming positive. They showed that there was no significant drop in student ratings between semesters, and that was the kind of information which turned out to be incredibly useful for our Provost directly in her discussions with other senior leaders and our board of regents at the University of Minnesota.

The student survey turned out to be a powerful tool for getting feedback about the student experience during a difficult pivot to remote learning, and it provided strong reassurance to faculty across the University that despite the difficult circumstances, students were appreciative of the extraordinary effort that faculty put into changing their course delivery on short notice.

The other challenge is that we were approximately 60% paper and 40% online based in our surveys and this created some issues. We still have faculty who are unhappy with that shift so messaging around that – and the burden it put on our Office for Measurement Services in terms of communications – was a challenge. Of course, this whole situation also presented an enormous opportunity to make the shift to online administration, which we had hoped to ease into over a longer time period.

*"The student survey turned out to be a powerful tool for getting feedback about the student experience during a difficult pivot to remote learning"*

What we found was that the response rate, which is the one thing that had caused hesitation around switching to online only administration of the survey, did not drop in any significant way compared to online courses during our regular terms. Those response rates are still probably too low for our liking, especially in courses with low enrollment, but overall it showed that we have a path towards a better practice for improving online response rates going forward.

In hindsight, I do wish we had anticipated some of these issues earlier. It was a little bit of a scramble to get from where we were to where we needed to be, but overall it worked out well because of the exceptional team effort between our center for teaching excellence, the Provost's office, and the Office of Measurement Services. I also wish that we, in addition to getting student feedback, would have created a faculty survey in tandem with using Explorance Blue and that was probably a missed opportunity. What ended up happening in the fog of spring semester is everyone was pulled in many different directions and that got lost in the shuffle. We did, however, undertake some faculty surveys later in the summer, for example one around colleagues' work-life balance and the effects – current and potentially longer term – of the novel coronavirus pandemic on the faculty work environment.

For fall 2020, we are returning to the standard student ratings of teaching form with the exception of a couple of additional questions that pertained specifically to online learning that have now been incorporated into the form. It is also likely we will switch to going entirely online for our survey administration over the course of this academic year.



**Dr Ole Gram is Associate Vice-Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs at the University of Minnesota**

# University of Northampton

Five months into the role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Northampton I left the campus on 20th March 2020, the start of the Covid-19 lockdown, barely to return for another five months. However, as we set out to plan, adapt and improve our education during lockdown, quarantine requirements and social distancing over the months that followed, incorporating the student voice into our planning at all stages has been key.

One of the important ways we ensured the student voice was at the heart of our planning was to include student members at the weekly meetings of the student support sub-group of our Critical Incident Team. As the pandemic continued, this became the Business Recovery Group, and the student support sub-group met fortnightly instead of weekly, but we continued to have two or three Students' Union elected officers as members, participating in all discussions and decisions.

Of course, it is important to balance input from individuals with input from the wider student community. We run an annual survey of students' experience of the personal tutoring scheme in April, and in 2020, we were able to include questions to all our students in relation to the University's response to the outbreak. The timing of the

survey was fortuitous, and the feedback helped us to identify where we needed to make improvements, as well as providing encouraging and positive messages which were important in sustaining staff morale through the challenges of putting so many simultaneous changes in place.

*"The student voice has been central to our planning and has been reflected in positive outcomes for students and the University over this difficult time"*

The majority of students said they felt just as able to engage online as face-to-face, and referred to excellent levels of communication from staff through emails, phone calls and online meetings. Some felt that very little had changed and that staff were still responding well to queries. Most students also felt that online teaching was a great alternative and that staff were well prepared. Areas we learnt were not working so well for some students included access to library books, access to mental health support, problems with online virtual environments and difficulties with combining studying and looking after families.

Some students were concerned about practical elements of their courses which could not take place. Some students found online lectures hard to engage with and difficult to access and the differences in time zones of international students caused problems. Some students were struggling to work from home by themselves, and finding it hard to motivate themselves. We used this feedback to reassure ourselves that the majority of our efforts were working well, and to focus on those areas some students had highlighted as problematic.

In addition to this activity, we worked with specific groups of students to listen to their experiences and plan solutions which worked for them. International student representatives of the Students' Union helped us to understand the financial pressures on this group of students where the economic impact of Covid in the home

country meant their families could no longer afford their fees. We developed payment plans with these students to allow them to complete their degrees.

We also talked to students who had chosen a UK education because they wanted to become familiar with life in another culture and to build networks to advance their careers when they returned home. With the announcement of the UK lockdown, their plans to network and have work placements in the UK could not fully be realised, and we explored options to support them to achieve the aspects of their education which were important to them but restricted by lockdown.

Final-year nursing and allied health students who were identified as ready by their academic staff team were consulted on whether they were willing to leave their academic programme to work on the NHS frontline. We also teach many practical subjects, such as drama and fine art, which normally need group sessions or specialist spaces and equipment. Staff and students worked together to come up with the best solutions in terms of working together online from home and regaining access to their specialist spaces as soon as possible.

The student voice, via the survey, Students' Union, and key groups with specific needs, has been central to the University of Northampton's planning over the last seven months. This has been reflected in positive outcomes for students and the University over this difficult time. Next steps include listening to voices and requirements of people who are not yet accessing higher education, many of whom will be facing hardship as a result of unemployment triggered by the economic consequences of the pandemic.

**Professor Shân Wareing is Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Northampton**

# University of Portsmouth

At the beginning of the 2019-20 academic year we implemented a new student voice policy – Valuing Students' Views and Opinions, and this is significant because it represents how we look at things at the University of Portsmouth.

The policy – and our ethos – is about valuing students' opinions and doing something with them. Within this policy we emphasise our partnership with students, and we highlight three important aspects of the student voice: student surveys; student participation in quality assurance and enhancement; and student representation.

Here is what we are doing, even within the context of Covid-19 and our 'new normal', to support what we are calling at Portsmouth the blended and connected learning experience.

### Student surveys

As well as our new student voice policy, 2019 saw the implementation of a new curriculum framework and, as part of that, we introduced new internal course and module surveys. These were completely online for the first time.

It is going to be very important, as we progress through this academic year, that we look at feedback coming in from students right from the early weeks of teaching. We have also looked at survey data gathered by the Students' Union which carried out surveys over the first initial 'flip' to online and provided feedback on students' initial experience of online teaching and learning.

Triangulating all sources of survey data was a key element of our preparations of the delivery of blended and connected teaching and learning for the 2020-21 academic year. However, it is not just about surveys – it is about other feedback mechanisms too. We do not just want to rely on survey data, we need other student voice data. So we have developed virtual student panels to gather student input too. I have also created a virtual version of a mechanism which I conceived when I started at Portsmouth called 'Haver with Harriet', an informal drop-in session for students.

### Student participation in quality assurance and enhancement

This is something we have worked on for quite some time. We are very proud of our partnership with students, and have students on all our committees like the Quality Assurance Committee.

I also Chair the Student Experience Committee (SEC), which I have developed to function as a research group. We take data – both internal and external data, and both quantitative and qualitative – at the beginning of each academic year, from all sources across the University, and look at it together, staff and students, to decide where we are going to focus our attentions to enhance the student experience.

We have also had student representatives at all levels of our university-wide programme preparing for the new academic year: they are on the steering group, the planning group, all the workstreams, and some of the relevant workstrands. We really ensure we include students wherever we can, and one of the ways in which we have is, for example, on TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment) workshops. Having in SEC identified assessment as an area of focus, in TESTA workshops we looked at assessment data, both formative and summative, considering things such as quantity, quality, variety and distribution, with course teams and students, and how changes at programme level could be made for the benefit of students.

### Student representation

As part of developing our student voice policy we reviewed, jointly with the Students' Union, the course representative job description and expectations. We have already worked on how to enable course reps to be elected and trained in a blended and connected environment. We are also confident about how we will be able to work with course reps and the virtual student panels in the new academic year.

In terms of student feedback, the fact we are now completely online with our course and module evaluation surveys is useful, as it has given us the opportunity to do things differently, and we will build on that. It will be more important than ever to keep in touch with students

via our VLE and to make even better use of mid-module feedback. Students will thus feel connected as well as their views and opinions being valued. The course and module surveys will go ahead as they always have, but will require more surrounding communication as a result of being in a blended and connected learning environment.

---

*"It is important that within all of this we are making sure students feel that their feedback has created something of which they are firmly a part"*

---

Overall, we are content about our readiness to continue with student representation and feedback.

In summary, it strikes me that these three aspects of the student voice are also those we must focus on throughout the 2020-21 academic year – in our 'new normal' of blended and connected learning. It is important that within all of this we are making sure students feel that their feedback has created something of which they are firmly a part. Students are at the heart of everything we do, and we are practising what we preach.

**Dr Harriet Dunbar-Morris is Dean of Learning and Teaching at the University of Portsmouth**

# University of Strathclyde

I have been hugely impressed by the quality of response that Strathclyde's staff and students have made to the Covid-19 pandemic. Irrespective of their role or involvement, colleagues have stepped up to the plate and continued to deliver the best possible student experience in response to the changing environment and maintaining academic rigor, quality and standards throughout.

Our approach to capturing the student voice has been about sustained engagement and balancing the need to make formal 'announcements', for example regarding assessment and the move to blended learning, whilst providing reassuring communications to this year's graduates, progressing students and those joining the University in 2020-21. Some of our communications have, necessarily, been academically-focused. However, much has also been around pastoral support. Students are core to our planning for the academic year and their insight has helped determine the content and tone of communications through joint communications, video resources for new and returning students, emails, newsfeeds and social media updates.

Core to our activity has been reassuring students that their health, safety and wellbeing is our top priority. Our feedback suggests they have welcomed that proactive approach. I firmly believe that the partnerships we already had with our students have proved invaluable at this challenging time. Had we needed to build relationships, it would have been much tougher. We entered this period from a position of teamworking and trust where we had systems in place to ensure students were confident of communicating with us and, in turn, we had the mechanisms to update and respond.

Specifically in relation to module evaluation, we were in the midst of the phased introduction of Explorance Blue when the pandemic struck requiring the move to non face-to-face teaching in a largely off-campus environment. What we decided to do in terms of the adoption of Blue was to temporarily stop the evaluation completion prompts to students to ensure communications around continuation of teaching and activity were being prioritised. The evaluation window period was also extended to help maximise response

rate after communications restarted. Moving forward the ongoing roll-out of our module evaluation will help ensure we continue to capture and benefit from our students' feedback. The timing is excellent as we will have a mechanism to capture and respond to the student voice and feedback in a timely and efficient manner. Formal module evaluation will be important but the ability to gain mid-module feedback is likely to prove invaluable at this time of change, transition and adaptability.

---

*"Formal module evaluation will be important but the ability to gain mid–module feedback is likely to prove invaluable at this time of change, transition and adaptability"*

---

Like other institutions, we established a series of "lessons learned" groups and activities linked to the Covid-19 emergency response, and specifically around learning and teaching. We have been working with staff and students to identify what colleagues believe has worked, what has not, and where they see there may be some impact and carry over into the 'new normal'. Over the summer, and as we moved towards the new academic year, we have ensured that support for our students is embedded in our learning and teaching planning and we have integrated the lessons learned as well as the good practice from our established online programmes into the more responsive ones. In addition, the ongoing roll-out of our module evaluation will help ensure we continue to capture and benefit from our students' feedback.

The feedback we have had from our students has been very positive. They have appreciated the speed with which we reacted and responded. Our students, and also our staff, have highlighted the obvious pedagogical differences between courses that were specifically designed from the outset as online programmes and those which had to transition to online at incredibly short notice.

In terms of best practice in existing online learning provision we have our graduate apprenticeship activity in Scotland (this is similar to degree apprenticeships in

England). We have established an online-based approach, with pedagogy and assessment designed to reflect online requirements. An important element has been recognition of the importance of building a student community and having resources and support in place to do that at programme, department and school levels.

At the outset of the pandemic, we already had a dedicated education enhancement team to support online learning across the institution. These colleagues work in partnership with each faculty's digital champion and the University's staff development unit. This has worked exceptionally well and, in recent months, we have extended this to establish an equivalent at departmental or school level. To oversee, support and facilitate this we have a Strathclyde Online Learning Committee which works directly with our Learning Enhancement and Education Strategy Committees. This allows us to highlight and share best practice. For example, in August alone there were over 900 attendances at 40 teaching, learning and assessment development sessions.

As the new academic year begins I am sure there will be further challenges, but I have absolute confidence that we will be able to respond to these.



**Brian Green is Deputy Associate Principal (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Strathclyde**

# University of Westminster

In mid-March 2020, eight weeks after I started work at the University of Westminster, we moved all teaching, learning and assessment online.

Suddenly, because of the pandemic, I was presented with an unexpected opportunity to look afresh at our practice through student feedback on the changes. Their reactions highlighted the aspects of their education that they most valued. It was insightful to look at absences too – what was not missed, as well as what was. It was instructive to understand the opportunities and barriers in online education since these often reflected wider opportunities and barriers.

Our partnership with students is very important and we have multiple strands of dialogue with students. First, our partnership with the Students' Union, including student representatives, enacted through a digital platform, our Student Experience Committee (50:50 staff and students) and local forums. Second, our student voice panels which we draw on to research specific topics; and finally our Student Module Evaluations (SMEs).

We were midway through SMEs when the pandemic struck, so we moved them online (we have paper surveys) and added some pandemic-related questions which have provided important insights. All these sources of feedback fueled my thinking, and this article outlines reflections that I shared with colleagues at the University's Learning and Teaching Symposium.

The importance of building relationships was central. It was impossible to miss the value that students placed on knowing people and being known by them. This was not simply about expecting staff to listen and respond to feedback, but about relationships that deepened their experience. Their comments included the importance of "making connections"; "being in contact with different students and creatives". They argued: "human contact is very important".

Our students wanted to meet and know people who shared their passions, and they wanted to make friends. A lack of interaction from "some academics who are only uploading slides with no live teaching" was reported to our Student Experience Committee. Some feedback lamented the lack of onsite connections, but it was also true that online learning could sometimes facilitate human contact better than learning onsite.

One student explained: "…for the first time I know people on my course, I feel I've got friends. I've been coming to lectures for more than a year and we all kind of come and go, but now that we are online in a group I know people properly."

Staff, too, have noticed that some students thrive online, contributing confidently and participating in a way they never did when learning onsite. At Westminster we now talk about 'online'/'onsite' rather than 'online'/'face to face', because online live learning can be face-to-face too.

Students did not miss everything. Nobody complained about online lectures and no-one missed traditional exams – except perhaps some of the professional bodies! But students were positive about recorded lectures, particularly when they were chunked into bite-size sections with online activity between. Being able to review and revisit was a bonus, and students could work at their own pace.

However, the loss of specialist and practical learning opportunities was deeply felt. Despite the imaginative responses of my colleagues to the pandemic, students' close work in studios, laboratories and other specialist spaces using professional standard equipment could not always easily be replicated online.

Unsurprisingly it was students on the most practical courses who missed this most, but students on more discursive courses also missed practical, collaborative learning if this was not replicated in online activities, which it often was. This applied to loss of authentic assessments too. One focus group participant lamented: "I never wanted my assessments to be online and written".

Finally, it was impossible not to notice inequalities and barriers to learning: students without laptops, connectivity or study spaces. Prior to lockdown, these students came on campus to access space or computing, so the inequalities were partially masked – but they were still there.

Many of our students commute, so while some students could study well from the privacy of their own room – at home or in halls – these students never could – always needing to find a space on campus, and often struggling to find the time to travel. If we ever doubted it, education is not yet a level playing field. Lockdown made this more visible.

*"Our student feedback has been central in enabling us to develop a more granular understanding of our students' experiences"*

To conclude: distance learning has received attention during lockdown – understandably as teachers and lecturers race to move materials online. Our student feedback has been central in enabling us to develop a more granular understanding of our students' experiences than that big picture. And when I look at that student feedback, what shines out is the value they place on close, not distance, learning, whether that be online or onsite.

Close learning means getting together with those who share your passion: close-up practical activity with case studies, equipment and technical spaces; discussions with fellow students. And close learning creates connections in which barriers are noticed and addressed.



**Dr Sal Jarvis is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) at the University of Westminster**

# University of the Witwatersrand

By its very nature as a separated learning experience, remote learning as applied during the Covid-19 period presents barriers to student engagement and learning. These barriers could be one reason why we saw a drop in student response rates in course and teaching evaluations as we moved from face-to face to full online course delivery at our South African university this year. It is also a contributing factor to the general low student engagement and higher attrition rates exhibited in online classes such as MOOCs.

Sadly, the lack of student voice in low technology resourced institutions like those in Africa is further exacerbated by inequalities in access to technology. In these contexts, many students are marginalised and alienated from what is now the normal or mainstream education provision. But this can be obviated if we pay more attention to the student voice. Paying attention to student voice using affordable and accessible mobile devices and simple applications such as WhatsApp can go a long way in engaging students in learning, and also address issues such as gaining attention and maintaining persistence in learning. This is not just a matter of access to appropriate technologies. It requires a different way of designing learning activities where there are deliberate efforts made to ensure that students have more curricular choices, and that their perspectives and personal interests are considered. More flexible teaching and learning provision is needed.

This does not mean that students are left to their own devices. It means that there is a deliberate attempt to encourage the adoption of creative and democratised pedagogies where educators have more power to change the contexts of their daily practices, and students have more possibilities for genuine participation in their learning. A lot of learning scaffolding and support is required if we are to make sure that students are at the centre of the learning, but educators are central to meaningful education provision.

In the last decade we have seen an increase in the neoliberal reframing of educational policies with a growing focus on measurement, scalability and the need for institutions to highlight impacts. While we should not abandon the obligation of quality education provision which innately demands some level of accountability, we should be careful not to narrow our vision and education resolve to only focus on that. Our efforts should be directed towards providing education that meets human, social, economic and cultural needs as indicated in the OECD documents 'Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education' and 'Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education: where do we stand?' As Albert Einstein aptly purported, "Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted".



My experience and observation during this Covid-19 period is that the main barrier to student success in remote teaching has been the difficulty as teachers we have had in creating social and responsive connections with our students, as well as opportunities for them to connect with each other. The ability to interact naturally as we have had in the same classroom space together changed. Suddenly we could not use eye contact, smiles and other forms of non-verbal communication to set the tone and improve engagement. Those tiny social and emotional ways of interaction disappeared. Sitting alone in our own individual houses did not help. So how do we then design for this

engagement? How can we help our students persist and succeed?

Now, more and ever, we need to tap into our humanness or humanity – what we call "Ubuntu" in our African context. Ubuntu is translated as "I am because we are". There is a universal bond connecting all of us in these teaching and learning spaces, even though we are separated momentarily. We need to reflect on our own cognitive, emotional and social processes and apply them to motivate our students to gain attention, use their cognitive abilities and persevere.

Simple strategies we can use include those advocated by instructional designer Flower Darby who argues that emotion is a powerful tool in improving student engagement in online learning. These include: a) designing real world or authentic tasks that evoke emotions and engagement and lead to deep understanding; b) taking advantage of technology to create social and emotional connections by embedding contextual media such as local representative pictures, YouTube videos and texts; and (c) infusing activities that are fun and enjoyable. For example, in a recent engagement with early career academics and experienced professors attending a course on postgraduate supervision, the facilitators embedded a local South African dance challenge activity "Jerusalema" which has gone viral worldwide. The activity produced a level of enthusiasm and engagement between facilitators and participants which had been absent in a previous session.

*"Embedding the student voice and ensuring that students are actively engaged in learning is pivotal to facilitating student engagement in online provision"*

None of these pedagogical transformations will occur if we as educators do not pay attention to student views, or respect their contributions and provide them with real opportunities to participate meaningfully in the current teaching and learning activities. Embedding the student

voice and ensuring that students are actively engaged in learning is pivotal to facilitating student engagement in online provision. It can be achieved if we modify our education modalities.

One way for beginning to engage with and effect these changes is at course design level. In the 2020-21 academic year, we are introducing a new course design framework in which a critical element is student engagement. We are planning to embed this element in all our offerings (workshops, seminars and webinars), our normal course design processes as well as the support services we offer at the Centre of Learning, Teaching and Development, including the uptake of the digitisation of course and student evaluations.



**Dr Rita Kizito is Director of the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. In November 2020 she is joining the University of Twente as Programme Director of the Bachelor's programme in Technology, Liberal Arts and Sciences**

# Zayed University

From March 2020, everyone (including students) at Zayed University started working from home and all of our teaching has been done remotely. We had an intensive period of training our students, faculty and staff in the use of remote online technology – and this was very successful. From the start of the next semester we will move towards a 'mixed mode', where the expectation is that some teaching will be done on campus, but with social distancing, and it is likely that what teaching can be done remotely will be delivered in this way.

What we found during the shift to remote teaching was that student and faculty engagement was very good. However, we also found that as the semester progressed engagement and interaction fell away to some extent. Going forward, we need to think about how to retain that initial engagement throughout the whole semester, and how to help students maintain the discipline of keeping up with online sessions rather than dipping in and out.

We have a wide range of tools for sampling the student experience, and most of these are electronic, but I think the key thing in the 'new normal' is to make sure that the learning and teaching experience, and the wider student experience, lives up to the same standard as in the 'old world', if not exceeds it. Therefore it is going to be important to seek student feedback as we go forward, and as we find our way in this brave new world.

In terms of our channels for student feedback and communication, broadly we have a combination of institutional research and student affairs approaches for engagement:

**Institutional research**
Activities for sampling the course student experience:

- Institutional survey tool

- Student evaluation of learning environment

- Faculty evaluation of learning environment

- Student satisfaction survey

- Remote learning survey

- Reports to faculty at all levels of institutional hierarchy

- Text analytics tool to generate reports from open text student feedback

- Integrate data from surveys into our data warehouse for further analysis

**Student affairs**
Other activities for sampling the wider student experience:

- Surveys

- Focus groups (face-to-face and virtual)

- Open communication channels: announcements, emails, Blackboard, social media

- Student feedback is sought on all major services (e.g. one-to-one counselling, internship placements, careers fair etc)

- Student accessibility services staff have increased communication with students of determination – this is done through social media platforms like WhatsApp because traditional email is not as reliable

- One-to-one sessions via software platforms such as Adobe Connect and WebEx

We have an electronically-based student surveys system – and it may be that more mid-module evaluation is required so we do not get a shock at the end of the course. Many of our faculty use formative feedback and the new modality only encourages them to do that more.

We are also thinking about using artificial intelligence to track the progress of students and identify those who are at risk of failing their course, and specifically reaching out to them, which in some ways is easier in the new environment (especially in terms of identifying who those students are).

At Zayed we have a very proactive and dynamic student accessibility service, and during this period they have reached out to all our students of determination,

organising online forums for them and making sure that through online exams they were catered for and not disadvantaged. This has definitely been a challenge, but our accessibility services have risen to the occasion.

---

*"What is for certain is that this is a journey we need to undertake together – students, faculty and staff – and that student feedback needs to be a priority"*

---

We already had a virtual induction programme for students so it is a question of adapting this for different learning modes. We have a Centre for Educational Innovation which have been upskilling our faculty, who have already done a fantastic job getting to grips with the new ways of delivering teaching. Our experience has been that it is possible to make a fairly rapid transition from one system to the next – but it is a question of seeking student feedback to make sure that the experience we provide to them is up to scratch.

There is no doubt we are at the start of a journey. It remains to be seen what students' expectations will be around the quality of education going forward in this new environment. If there is something our students are not happy with, they are usually very forthright and proactive in expressing their views. They will let us know in no uncertain terms what they think about the quality of education we are providing.

What that will be, we have yet to find out, but what is for certain is that this is a journey we need to undertake together – students, faculty and staff – and that student feedback needs to be a priority.

**Professor Michael Wilson was Provost at Zayed University until July 2020. In October 2020 he joined Charles Darwin University as Provost and Vice-President**

# eBook sponsor: Explorance

Explorance helps universities improve teaching and learning through the way they capture, analyse and respond to student feedback. We work with hundreds of higher education institutions around the world, providing solutions for formative feedback (which gives lecturers the opportunity to seek feedback through bespoke, non-standard questions, during a module) and summative evaluation surveys at the end of semester (which provides standardisation on questions enabling comparisons across the institution). The Blue experience management platform is used for end of term and mid-term evaluations and provides a huge amount of valuable quantitative, qualitative and demographic data. Through the Bluepulse engagement network lecturers can engage in feedback and the evaluation of teaching during a module – not just at the end of it. They can ask questions at any time, and students can give feedback at any time. It enables faculty to build teaching and learning strategies that receive a welcome response from students and, because this is done in collaboration with the students, increases participation and engagement. Selected case studies:

**Blekinge Institute of Technology**
https://explorance.com/case-study/streamlining-course-evaluation-processes-at-blekinge-institute-of-technology/

**Kingston University**
https://explorance.com/case-study/kingston-university-creates-a-culture-of-continuous-improvement-supported-by-analytics-with-blue/

**Loughborough University**
https://explorance.com/case-study/loughborough-university-closes-the-feedback-loop-with-blue-course-evaluations/

**Reykjavik University**
https://explorance.com/case-study/strengthening-student-engagement-in-course-evaluations-at-reykjavik-university/

**University of Johannesburg**
https://explorance.com/case-study/blue-supports-university-of-johannesburgs-drive-for-evidence-based-decision-making/

explorance.

1470 Rue Peel, Suite 500
Montreal, QC H3A 1T1, Canada

*Telephone:* +1 514-938-2111
*Email:* info@explorance.com
*Website:* www.explorance.com